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AUTHOR Utley, Cheryl A.; Obiakor, Festus E.
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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews scientific and methodological problems in special education research related to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. The first section of the digest discusses the various definitions of race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status. The problems with current race classification and the difficulties in determining the true economic status of families are highlighted. The second section of the digest examines epistemological issues that special education researchers should consider. Presumptions related to the use of racial categorization and inferences made to explain differences in group data are discussed. The paper emphasizes the critical need to use value-neutral methods of data collection and interpretation to ensure that research findings promote an accurate, not stereotypical, view of racial and ethnic groups. The use of cultural standards of data generalizations typically based upon universal statements reflecting Eurocentric normative and scientific principles in race and ethnicity research is explored. The last portion of the digest provides guidelines for developing unbiased research procedures in sampling, instrumentation, and measurement. Special education researchers are urged to take a proactive approach to ensuring unbiased, valid, and reliable research results by addressing issues of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level in their research design, methodology, and reporting practices. (Contains 10 references.) (CR)

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Addressing Diversity in Special Education Research

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The ERIC/OSEP Special Project
The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive • Reston, VA 20191-1589
1-800-328-0272 • FAX 703-620-2521
E-mail: ericec@cec.sped.org • Internet: http://www.cec.sped.org/ericec.htm

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Addressing Diversity in Special Education Research

Cheryl A. Utley and Festus E. Obiakor

Over the next two decades, American society will become increasingly multiethnic and multilingual (Rodriguez, 1990). The number of children living in poverty will substantially increase, and there will be a significant increase in the number of homes where children speak a primary language other than English.

Students are at greater risk of needing special education services when they are poor or of a minority race or language (Baca & Almanza, 1991); therefore, it is critical that special education researchers address these issues if their results are to apply to the special education population. This digest reviews scientific and methodological problems related to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Three areas warranting specific attention include:

- Defining terms with precision and accuracy.
- Examining epistemological considerations as they relate to the study of racial and ethnic groups.
- Developing unbiased research methodology and procedures.

Defining Terms with Precision and Accuracy

There are many definitions of race, ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic status. Within these definitions, society creates, constructs, and shapes the criteria for determining the category to which individuals belong. It is important for researchers to acknowledge any inherent assumptions or limitations associated with the particular definitions that they have chosen for their studies. Two examples follow.

Race and Ethnicity. The classification scheme developed by the U.S. Bureau of Census is the most commonly used method for identifying racial and ethnic groups in the United States. But, unfortunately, it is not without problems. Enwisle and Astone (1994) summarize the most critical problems as follows:

- Race and ethnicity are confounded when respondents fall under more than one category (e.g., Hispanic, Latino, and Puerto Rican).
- The amount of information gathered on the ethnicity of a particular group varies among groups (e.g., there is an abundance of information gathered on Pacific Islanders, while little is collected for Haitians).
- Individuals may prefer to be acknowledged by categories different from those offered (e.g., Black rather than African-American).

Socioeconomic Status. The term, "social class," has been used to group people by such criteria as income, occupation, education, values, and behaviors. However, categories usually include classifications such as lower class, working class, middle class, and upper class (Banks and Banks, 1993). In traditional research studies, socioeconomic status is usually determined by an adult member of the household whose income level has the most influence on the economic status of the family. Unfortunately, this scheme does not reflect the fact that many racial and ethnic families in the United States are diverse, with children residing in two-parent, single-parent, and step-parent families. Thus, the economic status of the family may be influenced by a variety of sources (e.g., breadwinner within the family of residence or biological parent living apart from the child) that are not acknowledged by traditional indicators.

Examining Epistemological Considerations

Presuppositions and biases affect the research process. When considering multicultural issues, two essential epistemological considerations that should be examined, regardless of methodological approach, are presumptions related to use of racial categorizations and inferences made to explain differences in group data.

Race Categorization. The construction of race categories by social scientists has always been problematic. Traditional descriptions of racial groups with distinct phenotypic attributes have been repeatedly linked to presumptions about moral character, personality, interpersonal behavior, and intelligence–most of which are often depicted in a negative way (West, 1993) These presumptions not only undermine the integrity of the research, but fuel stereotypic thinking about diverse cultural groups.

Furthermore, in quantitative research, the use of codification schemes can promote homogeneous descriptions, since such schemes often use the underlying assumption that each individual has a similar racial identity. This can cause the results to show individuals who "look" a certain way and/or who have a certain identity characteristic, are therefore "alike" (Obiakor, 1994). As an alternative, researchers concerned with multicultural issues can explore within-group variability based on quantifiable data.

Explaining Group Differences. In status-related research with racial and ethnic groups, the issues of ethics and human values are extremely important and controversial (Stanfield, 1993). Value-neutral methods of data collection and interpretation are critical to ensuring that research findings promote an accurate, not stereotyped, view of racial and ethnic groups.

In race and ethnicity research, cultural standards of data generalization are typically based upon universal statements reflecting Eurocentric normative and scientific principles. Unfortunately, such an approach often assumes that concepts or standards, such as indicators of achievement, socialization, development, or performance, transcend cultural barriers. But they may, in fact, differ across cultural groups. Furthermore, some indicators that are determined to be "problematic" in one culture may actually have a positive effect on behavior in another culture. Knowledge of such cultural differences can help researchers avoid many of the procedural pitfalls that can result in stereotyping of racial and ethnic groups (Obiakor & Utley, 1997). .

The majority of race and ethnicity research may be categorized as (a) research that demonstrates cultural differences, (b) research that demonstrates socioeconomic differences, and (c) research that demonstrates racial and ethnic differences (Cole, 1986). All three categories of research hypothesize that "there is a difference" and "the results are predictable." For example, low socioeconomic level racial and ethnic groups perform poorer on academic learning tasks, exhibit different behaviors, or demonstrate less knowledge than comparison groups comprised of middle-upper socioeconomic levels.

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Consequently, cultural effects on achievement, socialization, development, and performance are difficult to determine because appropriate comparison or control groups are rarely used in the reported research.

In the past, researchers have applied Eurocentric concepts of families, deviance, and psychological development to the experiences of different racial and ethnic groups (Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990). The cultural -deficit model is the most prevalent conceptual model in studying the achievement and failures of African-American families and their children (Spencer, Kim, & Marshall, 1987). "Blaming the victim" mentality was the underlying assumption that was used to describe the results of studies and identify solutions to problems of childhood poverty and educational underachievement (Barker, 1993). For example, underachievement among African-American children was blamed on pathological and dysfunctional family environments. Methodological problems in this research included confounding variables such as father absence and family income. In addition, matriarchal or female-headed households in African-American working class families, when compared to white middle class families, were interpreted as deviant and pathological. This controversial line of research suggests that alternative family structures are viewed as immoral and as social problems. There was no attention directed toward understanding the family structure as an explanation of underachievement, diversity, and gender differences. In essence, cultural standards, data collection procedures, and generalization strategies in social science and psychological research have studied specific racial or ethnic groups that represent only a small segment of the population and generalized the behavior of that subgroup to the entire population, regardless of socioeconomic status. This research process has led to the stereotyping of racial and ethnic groups that are paralleled with negative and deleterious consequences for those groups, in general (Shade, 1997).

Developing Unbiased Research Methodology and Procedures

To develop unbiased procedures, special education researchers must consider three areas: sampling, instrumentation, and measurement.

Sampling. A clear, concrete definition and description of the demographic characteristics of the sample under study is key to enabling researchers to replicate work (Padilla & Lindholm, 1995). At the very least, the racial and ethnic make-up of the study sample should be described, and there should be a process in place to control for the confounding of such variables as location (i.e., urban, rural, or suburban), acculturation, language, and socioeconomic level.

Instrumentation. Issues of instrumentation and measurement as they relate to racial and ethnic groups are central to understanding research conclusions. For example, the use of research instruments such as rating scales and achievement tests that may be appropriate measures for middle-class Anglo children and their families, may not be appropriate for research with other racial and ethnic groups (Hilliard, 1995; Obiakor, 1994; Padilla & Lindholm, 1995).

When selecting instruments, appropriateness or cultural equivalence should be considered. Key questions include:

- Are the selected instruments appropriate for use with the ethnic group in question?
- Is there equivalence across cultures of important concepts that are used in educational research?
- Have the instruments been accurately translated?
- In addition, the cultural relevance of items on instruments can have different effects on racial and ethnic groups. To address the issues, researchers must decide whether or not they need instruments with certain specifications to meet the needs of different populations. Key questions include:
- Is it necessary to use specially designed instruments to assess characteristics such as acculturation, ethnic identity, English-language proficiency, or culturally specific learning strategies?
- How are such instruments identified for use with multicultural populations?

Finally, there is a growing body of research that suggests that different groups may respond differently to test-taking strategies when responding to the same information -- thereby biasing results. A key question that addresses this issue is: Do students of different cultures respond to the research questionnaires and other data collection instruments in the same manner?

Measurement. Multicultural factors can affect issues of reliability and validity (Hilliard, 1995). There are several ways that researchers might guard against bias. For example, internal-consistency reliability should be computed separately for each racial and ethnic group and their comparison groups (Padilla & Lindholm, 1995). Similarly, because constructs can have different meanings across racial and ethnic groups, exploratory factor analysis can be used to determine whether the instruments that are to be used in the research truly measure the construct in question.

Conclusion

Multicultural factors can have a far-reaching impact on special education research, and they are predicted to have an even greater impact in the future. A conscientious and thorough effort by researchers is needed to guarantee that research findings result in informed decisions on special education policy and practice. Special education researchers can take a proactive approach to assuring unbiased, valid and reliable research results by addressing issues of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level in their research design, methodology, and reporting practices.

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